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# Making Minds Matter: Infusing Mindfulness and School Counseling

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Making Minds Matter: Infusing Mindfulness and School Counseling

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a rationale for the integration of mindfulness interventions in school counseling. Mindfulness practices currently are neither widely known nor well utilized in the school counseling environment. Implementation of mindfulness in schools can help students increase academic performance, develop social skills, and learn coping mechanisms to enhance their personal quality of life. By helping students learn to embrace and practice self-awareness, school counselors empower students to take ownership of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Historical foundations, basic tenets, current research, applications for school counseling, multicultural considerations, and implications are discussed.

*Key Words:* school counseling; mindfulness; complementary and alternative therapies

### Making Minds Matter: Infusing Mindfulness and School Counseling

As school populations grow in diversity, issues related to understanding, respecting, and valuing both self and others become increasingly important. The escalating need for school counselors to become and remain proficient regarding multifaceted interventions correlates to the ever-increasing diversity in schools and communities (Constantine & Sue, 2005; Hill, 2003). School counselors must be prepared to work effectively with diverse students, staff, administrators, and parents / guardians and to meet the academic, behavioral, and emotional developmental needs of all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004; Constantine & Sue, 2005; Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005). As students grow in personal awareness, they simultaneously increase academic performance, social skills, and coping mechanisms to enhance their personal quality of life (Hamiel, 2005; Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2005; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Implementing mindfulness with students of various developmental levels may be one way school counselors can help students realize their strengths and achieve their fullest potential.

Mindfulness can be most comprehensively defined as a multifaceted, present-moment awareness intervention that capitalizes on self-perceptions (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Nanda, 2009). Through this perspective, perceptions of self and of reality are relational rather than distinct entities (Nanda, 2009). Therefore, the individual's internal reactions are often the root of the discomfort expressed (Whitfield, 2006). Mindfulness can be used with students as a model of empowerment, helping students learn and accept personal responsibility for their lives while externalizing events beyond their control. By helping students learn to embrace and practice self-awareness, school counselors empower individuals to take ownership of thoughts, feelings, and actions through the use of tailored interventions (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Nanda, 2009).

Ownership enables students to exhibit self-control over thoughts and emotions rather than the thoughts and emotions driving the actions (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008). Consequently, mindfulness interventions may contribute to an individual's overall physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.

Exploring mindfulness in the realm of schools may provide effective interventions addressing both prevention and remediation. Mindfulness techniques can provide a context for understanding, respecting, and valuing both self and others. Historical perspectives, theoretical tenets, current research, and multicultural considerations provide a foundation for implementing mindfulness in school counseling.

### **Historical Foundations and Perspectives**

Understanding historical perspectives and development of mindfulness provides a foundation to understanding the implementation of intervention techniques. Theoretical tenets and common techniques are derived from Eastern philosophy, presenting an alternative perspective for application when compared with Western approaches (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008; Nanda, 2009). Western foundations of psychology differ significantly from those of the East, but the two approaches remain compatible. When properly understood and applied, the concept of mindfulness enhances school counselors' abilities to effectively address pressing student issues.

### **History**

Derived from Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness practices take the perspective that all life is composed of sufferings, providing teachable moments for personal growth (Carmody, 2009; Gehart & McCollum, 2007). These inescapable sufferings may be based on attachment to objects, relationships, inherent illness, change, and death (Hahn, 1998). Recognizing that

suffering is an intrinsic aspect of living provides the opportunity to practice letting go of what is beyond personal control to live a more fulfilling life (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Nanda, 2009).

Although mindfulness is founded in Eastern philosophy, mindfulness practices and teachings began to appear in Western publications in the United States via medical research in the 1960s, focusing on benefits for chronically ill patients (Rothaupt & Morgan, 2007). The use of mindfulness first appeared in Western psychotherapy research in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008; Whitfield, 2006). Although the use of and research regarding mindfulness continue to grow in the medical, psychological, and counseling fields, a literature search revealed no publications on the use and effects of mindfulness from a school counseling perspective.

Despite the field in which mindfulness is used, practitioners have historically focused on the relationship an individual has with the underlying issue rather than on the problem itself. Healing, wholeness, wisdom, and personal peace are derived from understanding and altering the relationship between the individual and event or issue (Carmody, 2009; Hahn, 1998). Through this perspective, counselors who practice mindfulness implement different interventions to guide the individual in altering the relationship between the individual and the problem rather than “solving” the presenting problem. In school counseling, this perspective may be used to help students recognize issues they can and cannot control and refocus on how to cope with such issues rather than trying to directly solve them.

### **Major Theoretical Tenets**

Mindfulness is dedicated to present-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, and senses for the purpose of better management of stressors (Lee, Semple, Rosa, & Miller, 2008; Nanda, 2009; Semple et al., 2005; Whitfield, 2006). Central to mindfulness practice is the act of

purposefully paying attention to self and self-in-relation, in the unfolding of moment-to-moment experiences (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Kostanski & Hassed, 2008).

Through this self-awareness, thoughts, feelings, physical reaction, and perceptual reality are viewed as interconnected (Nanda, 2009). Therefore, an individual can become aware of bodily sensations and reactions that accompany thoughts and emotions as they unfold (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Whitfield, 2006). For students, this awareness and understanding can provide a foothold for change. By developing an increased awareness to internal reactions, a form of desensitization develops to those internal emotional, cognitive, and physical reactions (Whitfield, 2006). Removing or separating self from these internal reactions enables the student to identify, not as the reaction, but rather as an individual who is experiencing an emotion, thought, or physical state.

This realization begins a process of separating self from emotional, cognitive, or physical reactions. Separating self from internal reactions empowers an individual to stop the thought process, step back from the emotion, and actively minimize physical responses of a previously troubling situation—all essential skills for children and adolescents (Hamiel, 2005; Semple et al., 2005). A school counselor can help students learn to separate their personal identities from a situation, emotion, or event. Through this process, school counselors also teach students to mindfully respond rather than immediately react. Therefore, school counselors can facilitate students' exploration of effective coping mechanisms in the management of stressors, a primary tenet of individual counseling within the ASCA (2004) national model.

Having self-compassion and self-acceptance during the unfolding awareness of reactions is a critical element in mindfulness practice that promotes safety in discovering and understanding self (Carmody, 2009; Gehart & McCollum, 2007). Mindfulness helps an

individual practice removing self-judgment to recognize reactions as they are, rather than as inherently good or bad (Haris, 2009; Whitfield, 2006). Therefore, as an individual becomes aware of a reaction, it is essential to be nonjudgmentally attentive to these aspects of awareness so that safety can be developed (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008; Lee et al., 2008; Nanda, 2009; Whitfield, 2006). Recognizing and unconditionally accepting any one of these components of self-help prevent the escalation of negative thoughts and feelings in patterns of behavior (Lee et al., 2008; Semple et al., 2005). Students may then use mindfulness practices to build self-acceptance and appreciation of others' circumstances. Learning to accept thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions in a nonjudgmental way may help students become more understanding, respecting, and valuing of both self and others, thereby enhancing safety of the school community (ASCA, 2009).

The practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental, purposeful, inner-self attention must be taught, as it is not an innate aspect of human development (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Kostanski & Hassed, 2008). Experiential techniques and specific exercises in concentration are often used in teaching mindfulness. Continual and persistent practice is important because mindfulness is a way of learning how to cognitively modify instinctual observational techniques and become increasingly aware in a nonjudgmental fashion (Kurash & Schaul, 2006). The school setting may be ideal for such practices, as students may apply these techniques and skills during counseling sessions, in class, socially, and at home.

### **Common Techniques**

Recognizing and accepting reactions as neutral, while also learning to be aware of them but not involved in them, can take a significant amount of practice (Hamiel, 2005; Semple et al., 2005). School counselors may encourage mindfulness with students by helping them learn to be

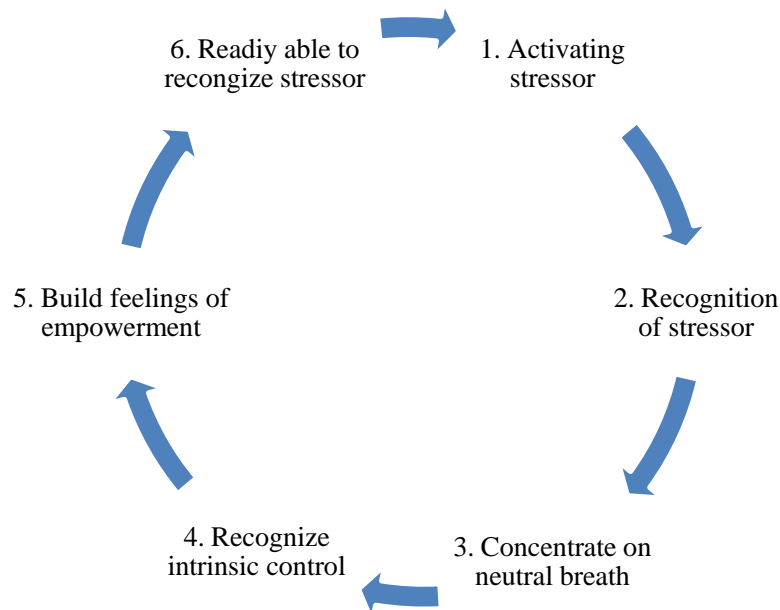


OK with not knowing what to do in a situation or with an emotion, taking ownership for each reaction, and accepting oneself as a continual work in progress (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Hahn, 1998; Nanda, 2009). Although there are a multitude of techniques that may be implemented when learning to experience mindfulness, the most common two include reoccurring experiential descriptions and breathing techniques.

**Reoccurring experiential descriptions.** When using reoccurring experiential descriptions, counselors ask clients to describe thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions that arise each time a specific event occurs (Whitfield, 2006). Through this reflective exercise, clients can become desensitized to the potency of such reactions, thereby developing a more accepting sense of self. In addition, this exercise places a strong emphasis on decelerating thoughts, feelings, and reactions in efforts to slow down the client's pace of life (Nanda, 2009). Descriptions are as available as an individual is willing to be aware of the emotion, thought, or reaction; therefore, this experiential practice exercise is readily available (Carmody, 2009). This technique can be applied in schools, where students talk about or describe the preceding event, thought, or emotion to work toward a state of increased awareness of personal control. These learning experiences can then be extrapolated to the students' social and home environments. With this powerful tool, a wide array of difficulties may be neutralized or made more manageable. Those who are able to use mindfulness to face, manage, and overcome difficult situations such as the death of a loved one, divorced parents, social difficulties, and other issues can be empowered to live better lives, make stronger choices, diffuse feelings of guilt, and help others by sharing mindfulness skills (Christensen, Sevier, & Simpson, 2004; Nanda, 2009).

**Breathing techniques.** Breathing techniques are commonly used in mindfulness training because breath is a neutral center bridging the mind and body (Hamiel, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 2005;

Nanda, 2009). When attention is redirected to a neutral center such as breath, tension levels and sensations that accompany stress naturally follow and provide decreased emotional reactivity to the stressor (Carmody, 2009). As individuals become comfortable in bringing attention automatically to neutral breath, a sense of personal control can develop and provide a cycle of empowerment for the individual (see Figure 1). In this cycle, first, an activating stressor occurs, then the individual recognizes it as a stressor. After recognition of the stressor, the individual concentrates on neutral breath. Through focusing on breath, emotions and thoughts can decelerate and lose potency, enhancing an individual's ability to react thoughtfully. The individual's perceived ability to control reactions then builds a sense of internal empowerment, further enabling recognition and diffusion of future stressors. This point is particularly important for students as they experience new social, cultural, and academic horizons.



**FIGURE 1:** Cycle of empowerment. This figure illustrates the cycle of awareness and empowerment experienced when learning to focus on neutral breath.

## **Research**

Research regarding mindfulness commonly focuses on implications for individuals experiencing anxiety, attention issues, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although commonly used with adults, mindfulness training is beginning to appear in research regarding use with children and adolescents. Mindfulness is commonly used in private practice, hospital settings, and in couple / family therapies; however, there is little research on its use in schools.

## **Current Use**

Mindfulness can be perceived as a metatheory easily fused with common counseling theories. Current literature and research have integrated mindfulness approaches with rational emotive behavior therapy (Whitfield, 2006), cognitive and behavioral counseling (Peterson, Eifert, Feingold, & Davidson, 2009; Whitfield, 2006), existential theory (Claessens, 2009; Nanda, 2009), and postmodern theoretical approaches (Gehart & Pare, 2008). Underlying tenets of mindfulness parallel these theories, providing a framework and foundation for integrating mindfulness interventions into various forms of counseling (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008; Rothaupt & Morgan, 2007).

**Common issues.** Mindfulness is often used in family therapy (Christensen et al., 2004; Gehart & Pare, 2008), with PTSD (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009; Hays & Strosahl, 2004), and in community mental health settings (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008; Semple et al., 2005). In family settings, mindfulness is often used to help partners and family members build understanding and appreciation for others, develop a sense of calmness before reacting to events, and enhance personal self-awareness and self-validation (Christensen et al., 2004; Gehart & Pare, 2008). When working with clients who experience PTSD, mindfulness is used to help reframe their relationship with the event, depression, and anxiety from that of shame and guilt to

a framework of accepting and honoring the suffering experienced (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009; Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Hahn, 1998; Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

In community mental health settings, mindfulness is often used with clients experiencing anxiety or attention issues. When working with clients experiencing anxiety, mindfulness interventions may be used to help increase their internal locus of control and decrease the physical reactions associated with their anxiety (Schure et al., 2008). Unmanaged anxiety and stress have deteriorative effects on the physical and psychological wellness of both adults and children (Schure et al., 2008). The use of mindfulness interventions is appropriate for clients of all ages and warrants further research regarding their implementation and efficacy with adult, adolescent, and child populations that experience anxiety (Semple et al., 2005). Mindfulness has also been shown to help clients build concentration and enhance short-term memory; therefore, it is commonly used with individuals experiencing difficulties with sustaining attention (Carmody, 2009).

**Children and adolescents.** Research on mindfulness with children has focused specifically on clinical settings (Hamiel, 2005; Lee et al., 2008). In counseling, mindfulness is used to create a basis for change in behaviors (Hamiel, 2005; Napoli et al., 2005). When working with children and adolescents, mindfulness can be used to help them accept mistakes, differentiate the aspects of life they can and cannot change, accept uncertainty, and recognize that some suffering may be needed to develop decision-making skills (Napoli et al., 2005; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008).

Mindfulness techniques commonly used with adults may be adapted for use with children and adolescents with modifications for developmental memory and attention capabilities (Lee et al., 2008; Semple et al., 2005). When working with children and adolescents, it is important to

provide a counseling room that is inviting and conducive to concentration (Semple et al., 2005). Integrating experiential activities that incorporate verbal fluency and promote reasoning using games, activities, and stories is also crucial (Lee et al., 2008; Semple et al., 2005). Interventions may focus on breathing, walking, and descriptive exercises similar to those used with adults. By integrating “everyday” practices with children, motivation remains viable and practices become habitual (Lee et al., 2008; Semple et al., 2005). Through these practices, mindfulness is readily applicable and available for use with children and adolescent populations.

### **Application to School Counseling**

Elementary and secondary school settings may offer an ideal environment for the implementation and practice of mindfulness. Because mindfulness interventions are perceived to be within the practitioner, they are innately portable and easily applicable to the school environment (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008). Mindfulness can help increase friendliness, acceptance, and compassion (Kurash & Schaul, 2006), essential skills for students (ASCA, 2009). Students who learn to use mindfulness techniques early in life could more readily increase concentration and advance in academic skills. They may develop into self-reflective individuals who are aware of self and appreciative of others’ circumstances.

### **Avenues for Implementation**

Research regarding mindfulness with children has focused primarily on clinical settings; however, the school field offers potential for the application of mindfulness practices. For instance, mindfulness can help students become more mentally focused through the use of breathing techniques and concentration exercises (Hamiel, 2005; Lee et al., 2008; Mind News, 2007; Napoli et al., 2005), thereby potentially leading to increased academic ability. Mindfulness has been implemented into classroom lessons conducted by teachers to help

improve academic ability, decrease test anxiety, and increase social skills (Lee et al., 2008). In this study, teachers attended in-school mindfulness workshops to learn the basic skills of mindfulness practice. Then, teachers used mini-lessons to relay these techniques to students. By doing so, teachers used short daily lessons to improve academic achievement and decrease school violence (Lee et al., 2008), each critical components of the ASCA national model for school counselors (ASCA, 2004, 2009).

If mindfulness interventions were extended to individual and small-group counseling sessions and guidance curricula as well as daily curricula, students could experience the continuity of practice recommended for mindfulness interventions (Semple et al., 2005). Infusing mindfulness into both counseling sessions and classroom environments promotes collaboration between counselors and teachers. School counselors then become liaisons, helping teachers learn mindfulness practices to then help students learn the same practices. By collaborating and using school wide teaming approaches, school counselors multiply their efforts and increase efficiency in developing academic success and bolstering school safety (ASCA, 2004, 2009; Epstein & VanVoorhis, 2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). This approach to implementing mindfulness may provide a new path for continuity of care to help students overcome academic, personal, and social barriers.

Mindfulness can also be viewed as a vehicle for students to learn empathy for self and others (Gehart & McCollum, 2007). Expressing compassion enhances interpersonal and social skills. Self-awareness empowers students to manage and accept feelings rather than avoid them and provides viable alternatives to acting out. Mindfulness techniques are also used to help reduce negative self-talk and increase social skills (Lee et al., 2008; Mind News, 2007; Williams, 2008), leading to empowerment and healthier relationships. The enhanced ability to relate to

stressors as separate from self helps alleviate social anxiety and test-taking tension, improves concentration, and assists with resolving peer conflicts (Lee et al., 2008). The application of mindfulness techniques can help improve student's self-esteem and intrinsic self-worth (Nanda, 2009). By building an accepting stance toward self and developing intrinsic self-worth, students learn to be kinder and more compassionate to self and others.

Practicing mindfulness encourages students to respond to life events using a present-moment approach, remaining focused, externalizing the troubling issues, and implementing necessary steps to live a healthier, more fulfilled life (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Lee et al., 2008; Williams, 2008). Through mindfulness practices, students increase their potential to feel empowered, develop closer interpersonal relationships, and experience greater achievements in the classroom. Therefore, using mindfulness in schools can help address prevention and remediation of various student-related social, emotional, and academic barriers. Focusing on prevention, students can learn the skills to succeed academically and interpersonally, decreasing the need for remedial counseling later in their schooling.

### **Multicultural Considerations**

Mindfulness is not gender specific, nor is it socially based; it crosses all socioeconomic and cultural barriers. Breathing exercises and techniques promoting awareness are compatible with multicultural traditions (Canda & Furman, 1999); therefore, these same techniques are readily and universally applicable for use in helping diverse student bodies (Napoli et al., 2005). In a safe, warm, accepting, nonjudgmental setting, students can share personal challenges, discuss difficult internal events, develop rapport with their counselor, experience safety, and learn to trust, despite cultural differences (Kurash & Schaul, 2006). This trust can then be

expanded to encompass other relationships and role modeled to peers, potentially helping many students and decreasing school violence (ASCA, 2009).

### **Counselor Role**

School counselors can play a central role in teaching and infusing mindfulness techniques into schools. School counselors model mindfulness behavior to help students gain personal awareness (Carmody, 2009; Williams, 2008). By inviting mindfulness into the therapeutic relationship, school counselors model behaviors needed to gain awareness and self-acceptance (Williams, 2008). Techniques such as breathing exercises or sensation descriptions are presented, modeled, and facilitated by school counselors. These techniques can also be infused into classrooms by teaching them to teachers and administrators in schoolwide teaming meetings. By integrating these techniques during counseling sessions and the classroom lessons, school counselors promote continual mindfulness practice. Through continuity of implementation, mindfulness can help students with individual growth and awareness and the development of important social skills, each required by the ASCA national model (ASCA, 2004). Mindfulness can also enhance appreciation of others and academic achievement.

During individual counseling sessions, the stated objective is one of acceptance and seeking to understand and acknowledge the underlying problem (ASCA, 2004; Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). School counselors view presenting and underlying issues with compassion and openness, empowering students to learn to live in a healthy relationship with the experience, behavior, or issue (Carmody, 2009; Gehart & McCollum, 2007). From this perspective, school counselors can present a goal for students to change their relationship to the issue rather than attempting to control or change the issue itself. For instance, if students present acting-out behaviors as a result of parental divorce, school

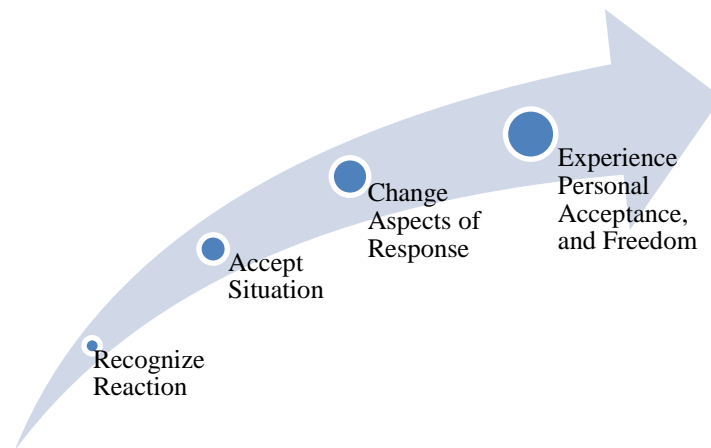


counselors can use mindfulness interventions to help students realize their role in regard to the divorce. Rather than criticizing and blaming themselves for the divorce, students can be empowered to recognize what they can control in the present circumstances: behaviors, thoughts, and emotions that surround the situation of divorce. By paying attention to the physical reactions, thoughts, and emotions, students can grow in personal awareness and self-acceptance and can promote a healthier lifestyle.

The school counselor plays a critical role in helping students recognize internal locus of control, personal awareness, and acceptance of issues beyond their control (ASCA, 2004; Epstein & VanVoorhis, 2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). Through this role, the school counselor helps introduce a pattern of recognition that promotes positive change and personal growth (see Figure 2). In the case of the parental divorce example, when the student recognizes internal reactions that he or she is acting on, the reaction can be assessed, understood, and managed, allowing the resultant behavior to change. By recognizing internal reactions to external events, students begin to defuse strong reactions and concentrate on a technique such as neutral breath to decrease the level of anxiety experienced. From there, students can develop other constructive ideas of what to say or do in response to the situation and associated emotions, rather than acting out. When reactive behaviors are supplanted by more constructive actions, students can begin to accept the change in family dynamics and their new role in the family. As mindfulness develops around this family change, students alter thoughts, feelings, and reactions and provide a foundation for personal freedom and empowerment.

### **Challenges**

Although the use of mindfulness interventions in schools provides promise, the implementation of such techniques is not without challenges. For school counselors to



**FIGURE 2:** Pattern of Recognition. This figure illustrates the pattern of recognition to personal acceptance and freedom that can result from mindfulness interventions.

implement mindfulness in their practice, they must first be trained in mindfulness and use such interventions personally on a daily basis (Nanda, 2009; Semple et al., 2005). This would entail additional and continued training to remain abreast in techniques, adding to the already full schedule experienced by most school counselors. In addition, this model of mindfulness could only be used with students who are willing to practice mindfulness and whose parents are in agreement with these techniques. Openness to feelings and self-assessment can be a scary experience, especially for children and adolescents who may not understand these aspects of self. Therefore, building rapport with students and creating an environment of safety remain central to the counseling experience. In addition, educating parents regarding the benefits of mindfulness techniques is also important.

### Summary

Developing a sense of compassion, respect, and understanding in students is a central component in the work of school counselors, particularly as student bodies across the country continue to diversify. To be adequately prepared to meet this need, school counselors must be

able to implement multifaceted approaches. Mindfulness may be one way to fill this need, as the techniques provide multifaceted, present-moment awareness interventions to be used in both prevention and remediation of student issues. As students are able to engage and apply mindfulness practices, they develop a stronger ability to face, manage, and overcome difficult situations. By facing these issues through the lens of mindfulness, students may be empowered to take ownership for their lives, make stronger choices, develop enhanced academic abilities, and cultivate stronger social skills.

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